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Group Effectiveness Research Laboratory

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY · UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS · URBANA, ILL.

GROUP ATMOSPHERE AND THE PERCEPTION OF GROUP FAVORABLENESS

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TECHNICAL REPORT NO. 71 (68-16)
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Communication, Cooperation, and Negotiation in Culturally Heterogeneous Groups
Project Supported by the Advanced Research Projects Agency, ARPA Order No. 454
Under Office of Naval Research Contract NR 177-472, Nonr 1634(36)

FRED E. FIEDLER AND HARRY C. TRIANDIS
Principal Investigators

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Abstract

Undergraduate Ss rated a set of hypothetical task groups in terms of "favorableness" and "liking." These groups varied according to (a) member-to-leader affective relations and (b) member-to-member affective relations. It was found that, although both types of relations substantially influenced Ss' ratings, the member-to-leader relations were far the more important. Finally, subject characteristics (task vs. relations orientation) controlled a small, though significant, proportion of the variance in the favorableness ratings.

Group Atmosphere and the Perception of Group Favorableness¹

Martin M. Chemers² and David A. Summers³

University of Illinois

Affective relations within task groups have long been considered relevant to (1) group productivity (Goodacre, 1953), (2) interpersonal communications (Newcomb, 1961), and (3) leadership effectiveness. In discussing the third factor above, Fiedler (1967) has suggested that the degree to which a group situation is favorable for a leader strongly depends upon the affective relations within the group; i.e., the "group atmosphere." It should be noted, however, that affective relations (or group atmosphere) need not be regarded as a unidimensional construct. On the contrary, several distinct aspects of group atmosphere can be readily identified. These aspects are (a) leader-to-member relations; i.e., how the leader perceives his group members, (b) member-to-leader relations; i.e., the degree to which the group members perceive their leader as favorable or not, and (c) member-to-member relations; i.e., the extent to which the mutual attitudes held by the group members toward each other are favorable or unfavorable. These three types of relations can be regarded as separate and distinct. Fiedler (1967) has based his measure of leader-to-member relations upon the first of these aspects; i.e., the degree to which the leader views his group as favorable. This paper, however, shall be concerned with (b) and (c) above.

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The purpose of the present study is twofold: (1) to determine, for both task- and relationship-oriented leaders, which of these two aspects of group atmosphere is more important in determining a potential leader's perception of group favorableness, and (2) to determine whether or not these two types of relations are perceived differently by different types of leaders; that is, according to task- or relationship-oriented leadership styles.

Method and Procedure

Leadership style. Fiedler (1967) has noted that Ss who described their least preferred coworker in unfavorable terms ("low LPC leaders") tend to be task-oriented. In contrast, Ss who described their least preferred coworker in favorable terms ("high LPC leaders") tend to be relationship-oriented; i.e., oriented toward maintaining harmonious interpersonal relations. In this study, 45 undergraduate males described their least preferred coworker on 17 bi-polar adjective scales (Fiedler, 1967, p. 269). Only the upper third (high LPC) and lower third (low LPC) of the distribution of Ss on the LPC scale are considered here.

Task. Both the high and low LPC Ss were given written descriptions of four hypothetical task groups. Each group differed in terms of (a) favorable vs. unfavorable member-to-leader (M-L) relations and (b) favorable vs. unfavorable member-to-member (M-M) relations. Ss were asked to rate each group on two 9 point scales: (1) the favorableness of the situation for the leader, and (2) the S's own liking of the situation as a potential leader. When this was completed, Ss were asked to rank the four groups in terms of "favorableness" and the "degree to which it was liked."

Design. The experiment assumed the form of a 2 (task vs. relationship-oriented) x 2 (favorable vs. unfavorable M-L relations) x 2 (favorable vs. unfavorable M-M relations) factorial design, with repeated measures over the last two factors.

Results

Inasmuch as Ss' rankings in terms of "favorableness" and "degree liked" were essentially consistent with the data obtained from the ratings on the two 9 point scales, only the latter will be discussed. Ratings of the hypothetical groups on the "favorableness" and "liking" dimensions were treated separately according to 2 (types of subjects) x 2 (M-L relations) x 2 (M-M relations) analysis of variance. A summary of the analyses, as well as indices of variance accounted for (w^2) is presented in Table 1.

Favorableness. All three independent variables contributed significantly to variations in the "favorableness" ratings. High LPC Ss were consistently more favorable (5.3) in their ratings than were low LPC Ss (4.4). As might be expected, groups described as having positive M-L relations were rated as more favorable (6.6) than groups having negative M-L relations (3.1). Similarly, groups with positive M-M relations were seen as more favorable (5.8) than groups having negative M-M relations (3.9).

The three-way interaction noted in Table 1 can be accounted for by the highly dissimilar ratings which the high and low LPC Ss assigned to the task group having negative M-L but positive M-M relations. Specifically, the low LPC Ss perceived this group as very unfavorable. Their ratings here were not significantly different from those assigned to the group in which all relations were negative.

Table 1

Analysis of Variance Summary for Favorability and Liking Ratings

Favorability		Liking	
F	w^2	F	w^2
Subjects (A)	7.83*	Subjects (A)	<1
L-M Relations (B)	85.89***	L-M Relations (B)	57.25***
M-M Relations (C)	17.48***	M-M Relations (C)	12.81**
(A) x (B)	NS	(A) x (B)	<1
(A) x (C)	NS	(A) x (C)	<1
(B) x (C)	NS	(B) x (C)	6.52*
(A) x (B) x (C)	6.79*	(A) x (B) x (C)	NS

NOTE - All F ratios have 1 and 28 degrees of freedom.

* $p < .025$
 ** $p < .01$
 *** $p < .001$

Liking. Significant effects resulting from subject differences were not present. Otherwise, Ss' responses on the liking dimension were much the same as those on the favorableness dimension. Again, Ss indicated a stronger liking for groups having positive M-L relations (6.5) than for groups having negative M-L relations (3.3). Similarly, they liked groups with positive M-M relations (5.4) more than groups with negative M-M relations (4.3). The two-way interaction can be accounted for as follows: the difference in ratings of groups with positive and negative M-M relations was greater when M-L relations were positive than when they were negative.

Discussion

Not surprisingly, variations in both member-to-leader (M-L) and member-to-member (M-M) relations resulted in substantial differences in S's perceptions of our hypothetical task groups. What is surprising is the differential importance these two aspects of group atmosphere had in determining S's ratings of favorableness and liking. As revealed by the variance shown in Table 1, the group members' perceptions about their leader comprise the more important aspect of the situation -- at least from the potential leader's point of view. How the group members felt about each other -- although relevant -- was clearly of secondary importance to the Ss.

The substantial variation in S's judgement of groups with different M-L and M-M relations indicates that interpersonal relations, or "group atmosphere," as considered in small group and leadership studies should not be treated as unidimensional. Moreover, the clear finding that these two aspects of "group atmosphere" are weighted differently demonstrates that S's perception of a task group can depend upon which aspect is varied. In short, the conceptual distinction made with respect to group atmosphere has important empirical implications -- at least at the cognitive level.

It should be kept in mind that recent theoretical approaches to leadership effectiveness (Fiedler, 1967) propose that leader performance depends upon the favorableness of the situation -- where "favorableness" is defined primarily in terms of group atmosphere. Just how the leader's own perceptions of the group enter into such an account is unclear. However, if it is granted that the leader's perception of the task group is indeed relevant to his behavior in the group, then a comprehensive theoretical treatment of leadership should include some consideration of subjective favorableness.

On the basis of numerous findings from leadership studies involving task vs. relationship-oriented Ss (e.g., Fiedler, 1967; Katz & Kahn, 1966), it was expected that the high and low LPC Ss would differentially weight member-to-leader and member-to-member relations when rating hypothetical task groups. Specifically, we expected that the low LPC (task-oriented) Ss would be less sensitive to variations in M-M relations than would be high LPC (relationship-oriented) Ss. The results provided only weak support for this hypothesis. The three-way interaction associated with the "favorableness" ratings suggests that the low LPC Ss were less sensitive to M-M relations, but only when M-L relations were negative.

The findings concerning subject characteristics must be regarded as only tentative, however. It should be kept in mind that LPC had significant effects on only one of the responses measures; i.e., perceived favorableness. Moreover, neither the main effect nor the interaction involving subject LPC accounted for a substantial proportion of the total response variance. Rather, the bulk of the systematic variance was attributable to variations in the characteristics of the hypothetical task groups. Finally, it must be pointed out that these results are restricted to the cognitive activity of our Ss. Whether or not task- vs. relationship-oriented Ss would indeed behave differently in actual groups remains for further study.

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